

Prime Minister Bart De Wever: Persistent, but also supple

By Michael Stabenow

Bart De Wever has reached his goal. If you believe the 54-year-old Fleming, it is one that he did not actually want at all. He would much rather have remained what he has been since the beginning of 2013: mayor of his home city of Antwerp, which has just over half a million inhabitants. Now things have changed: De Wever, whose New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) continues to propagate "the independent Republic of Flanders" in Article 1 of its party statutes, will bear responsibility for the fate of all 11.8 million citizens living in Belgium as the Belgian head of government of the five-party "Arizona Coalition".

What may seem like a contradiction in terms is not for the son of a staunchly right-wing nationalist father. The trained historian Bart De Wever, who likes to publicly celebrate his admiration for Roman times with Latin quotations, certainly draws lessons from historical developments. Two decades ago, as the young chairman of the N-VA, which emerged from the shambles of the former Flemish nationalist party Volksunie, he had a huge load of 50 euro notes tipped out of twelve lorries in Wallonia - as a symbol of the billions transferred from the north to the south of Belgium.

In contrast to the radical right-wing Vlaams Belang, De Wever and his party, which he has led since 2004 despite being officially limited to two terms in office, are in favour of an evolutionary restructuring of Belgium. De Wever continues to cultivate the emotive image of a southern part of the country living at the expense of prosperous Flanders. However, his party's participation in government in the so-called Swedish coalition with the liberal parties of both parts of the country (MR and Open VLD) and the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V) showed that more rights (and even independence) for Flanders are by no means the only driving force behind the N-VA.

In the new Arizona coalition with MR, CD&V, the centrist party "Les Engagés" and the Flemish Socialists (Vooruit), the aim is also to turn the political rudder to the right in budgetary and social policy, but also in migration and environmental policy, in the absence of any possible agreement on a further comprehensive, then seventh, state reform - even if consideration for the smaller coalition partners CD&V, Les Engagés and Vooruit has set some limits to this endeavour.

The realisation that not only the French-speaking Belgians, but also a majority of Flemish people continue to reject a division of the kingdom, has led De Wever to adjust his objectives. Instead of "independence", he sees "confederalism" as the "logical next step". On the Flemish radio station VRT, De Wever explained in the middle of last year: "If that works, then that's enough for me too. I'm not obsessed with it. Nationalism is a means to govern well. It is not an end in itself."

This is also based on De Wever's realisation in the interview that in the geopolitically turbulent 21st century, the pursuit of national independence takes on a different value. "This means that you also have to look at a larger scale," said the politician.

Far-reaching institutional reforms, with the exception of the abolition of the Senate, the second chamber of parliament, which in any case only has very limited powers, were not agreed in the coalition agreement. However, in dialogue with the federal state, the regions are to be given more opportunities to influence previously traditional federal policy areas such as the labour market and pensions.

De Wever has managed to present his ambition to head the government not as a question of personal ambition, but rather of political reason. Critics also attest to his negotiating skills and suppleness, despite the coalition negotiations that dragged on for a good seven months. In public

appearances, however, he likes to cultivate the image of a politician who not only knows everything, but often knows everything better. He can impress with his detailed knowledge - for example when he was able to match animal faeces in a television quiz programme. In debates, often also on television, hardly anyone can hold a candle to him rhetorically.

This demonstrative public self-assurance and, at times, self-righteousness is contrasted by self-doubt, as was recently seen in a portrait of publicist Paul Jaspers broadcast by the television channel VTM (BDW. Politiek Beest - Seizoen 2024 - Kijk volledige afleveringen op VTM GO). De Wever certainly possesses a sense of humour, more at the expense of others. However, the father of four is rarely seen laughing heartily, at least in public.

Instead, De Wever likes to decorate his appearances with Latin quotations and allusions that hardly anyone understands directly, as well as with occasionally pompous ceremonial.

After his election victory in Antwerp in 2012, he made his way to the historic town hall with 200 loyal members of his party in a kind of triumphal march at an early hour. Twelve years later, his son Hendrik accompanied his father on the evening of another successful local election with a coat of arms including a bird of prey and the inscription "SPQA" - a variation on the Roman national emblem "SPQR" ("The Senate and the People of Rome"), which refers to Antwerp.

No wonder that the new head of government commented on the agreement on the Arizona coalition treaty with the Latin quote attributed to Julius Caesar: "Alea iacta est" ("The die is cast"). If the Roman once crossed the Rubicon in his quest for power, it remains to be seen what fate will befall Belgium with the new head of government who has reached his goal - or, as Caesar once did, only an interim goal? - will be with the new head of government.

If De Wever is sworn in on Monday, the heads of state and government of the other 26 EU states will be able to form their first impressions of the new Belgian head of government at the informal summit meeting taking place that day in Brussels. Perhaps one or two of them will ask him whether he still sees himself as a "Euro-realist", as he did in 2011.

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